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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [BK](#)
SUBJECT: BOSNIA: CROATS SEEK EARLY ALLIES AS ELECTION YEAR
BEGINS

REF: A. 09 SARAJEVO 1381
[1](#)B. 08 SARAJEVO 1861
[1](#)C. SARAJEVO 61
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Classified By: DCM Jonathan Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In preparation for the October 5 general elections, the leading BiH Croat parties are unofficially considering possible coalition partners and rallying them around perennial campaign themes, particularly the need for a third, Croat-dominated entity. Further complicating the pre-election atmosphere are strains in the traditional Bosniak-Croat partnerships, due to which the "Croat capital" Mostar remains tense despite the fact that the battle for the mayoralty has ended. Also, an initiative in Croatia to eliminate dual residency rights for Croats outside Croatia has sparked concern among BiH Croats that Zagreb may be abandoning them. End summary.

HDZs Seek Partners among Croat Parties

[1](#)2. (C) The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)-BiH is poised to remain the dominant BiH Croat party, and party Secretary General Vlado Dzoic told us that HDZ-BiH currently is planning to enter the elections without any coalition partners. Nonetheless, he said that HDZ-BiH has signed a "gentlemen's agreement" with the Croatian Christian Democratic Union (HKDU) on "essential issues" such as constitutional reform, leaving the door open for a possible coalition closer to the elections. HDZ-BiH is planning the same agreement with the Croatian Peasants' Party - New Croat Initiative (HSS-NHI). Meanwhile, HDZ-1990 VP Martin Raguz has told us that his party is engaged in unofficial discussions with current coalition partner Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) but is also flirting with the idea of entering the elections alone.

Covic Strives to Remain in Charge

[1](#)3. (C) Covic and his partners are making visible efforts to unite the BiH Croats under their leadership ahead of the elections. At the behest of HDZ-BiH and HKDU, HSS-NHI organized a meeting on January 11 in Kiseljak, near Sarajevo, to which it invited all BiH Croat parties. As the Kiseljak meeting was largely an HDZ-BiH initiative, the chairmen of

HDZ-1990 and HSP sent only their deputies, and the National Party of Work for Progress (NSRzB) did not attend at all, per an agreement among the three parties. Participants at the meeting agreed that all willing representatives of the six signatories to the 2007 Kresevo Declaration -- HDZ-BiH, HDZ-1990, HKDU, HSS-NHI, HSP, and NSRzB -- should meet monthly to coordinate a "Croat strategy." (Note: The Kresevo Declaration was a proposal for constitutional reform that centered on a less than subtle reference to a third entity. End note.) Participants also agreed that constitutional reform would be necessary "to improve the unfavorable position of Croats in BiH" and that the best solution would be a Croat federal unit. They also mused about proposing a single candidate for various offices, including the Croat member of the Tri-Presidency, in an attempt to defeat the popular, multi-ethnic Social Democratic Party (SDP). (Note: Representatives of both BiH HDZs have told us that they are certain SDP will again win the Croat Tri-Presidency seat -- currently held by Zeljko Komsic -- if the HDZs do not provide a unified candidate. End note.)

Parties Pay Lip Service to Unity but Agree to Nothing

14. (C) HKDU convened the Kresevo parties again on February 1 in Mostar. This time the leaders of all six parties attended, but they could not agree on any issue discussed. NSRzB parliamentarian Jerko Ivankovic Lijanovic suggested himself as the joint candidate for the Croat Tri-Presidency member, claiming that he was "the only one who can defeat Komsic." All other parties resolutely rejected this idea.

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Covic then declared that HDZ-BiH would put forward its own candidate, whom he did not name, and urged the other parties to support that candidate, which they refused to do. HDZ-1990 President Bozo Ljubic proposed finding a non-partisan candidate, which Covic refused. HDZ-1990 VP Damir Ljubic told us that Bozo Ljubic told him that he is now considering boycotting the presidential elections altogether, as he will not support Covic's candidate and believes that even a joint candidate would be unable to defeat SDP given the widespread Bosniak support SDP enjoys. The parties also discussed constitutional reform at their meeting, with Covic roundly rejecting any reforms before the elections and opposing a "Dayton Two," which Ljubic and Jurisic support. Our contacts have told us that the parties have not set a date for their next meeting.

Ljubic Pushes His Own Initiatives

15. (C) In an effort to outdo Covic in leading a united Croat front, Bozo Ljubic is moving forward with plans for a Croat Forum, along the lines of the initiative he proposed in October 2009 (ref A). This Forum would unite the Croat political leaders, religious officials, and intelligentsia to "define the Croats' future path," including on constitutional reform. Raguz told us that Ljubic would not constitute the Forum, though, unless all parties guaranteed participation, and Covic decisively rejected the idea when Ljubic proposed it to him at the February 1 meeting in Mostar. HDZ-1990 also is rejuvenating the idea of an Inter-Cantonal Council (ref B), which it proposed in December 2008, to "de-block decisionmaking" in the three Croat-dominated cantons. The party plans to organize a "founding assembly" for the Council but has not yet set a date for the meeting. HDZ-BiH and HKDU officials characterize this idea as pre-election posturing that will come to naught, as the cantonal PMs "have no real power." HSP President Zvonko Jurisic, though, blatantly described it to us as the necessary first step toward creating a third entity. (Note: A Council of the same name in 2001 inaugurated the Croat Self-Rule movement, although the Council itself did not pass any major decisions, and even its minor ones were not implemented. End note.)

Inter-HDZ Bitterness Flows Freely

¶6. (C) The competing initiatives between the two BiH HDZs underscore enduring inter-party personal disputes and therefore the unlikelihood of HDZ reunification, particularly before the elections. Sensitivities are especially high as numerous HDZ-1990 members trickle back into HDZ-BiH. In fact, Vilim Primorac, a former HDZ-1990 official, became a member of the HDZ-BiH Presidency on January 25. Additionally, Raguz confirmed press reports that Covic is wooing him to return to HDZ-BiH, but Raguz told us that he is a "tough nut to crack" and that Covic will not succeed. Raguz noted that the reunification process is on hold, as "HDZ-BiH never got back to us on our proposed platform for negotiations." Damir Ljubic decisively told us that the two BiH HDZs will not reunify, as "we cannot disregard certain problems with personalities in the other party."

Catholic Church Exacerbates HDZ Divisions

¶7. (C) Another dividing factor in the HDZs' battle may be the Catholic Church, which has traditionally played a key role in supporting one or the other HDZ's election campaign. As has been the case since the 2006 elections, the Church appears closer to HDZ-1990, although its public message tends to focus more on unity on key issues than on a particular party. Cardinal Vinko Puljic, Archbishop of the Vrhbosna Archdiocese and the President of Bishop's Conference -- and widely considered the leader of the Catholic Church in BiH -- has publicly criticized Covic in the past and told the Ambassador in October 2009 that Covic had not asked to see him at all during the past year. On the other hand, media report that Ljubic has met with the Cardinal several times in the last year. Although not explicitly endorsing either party, the Cardinal continues to endorse the third entity concept, most recently at the December 2009 Bishop's Conference, which encouraged Croat political representatives to stick to the principles of Kresevo.

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Battle for the Bosniaks (and Serbs?)

¶8. (SBU) As the BiH HDZs seek to solidify their Croat partners, they also are looking for allies among the Bosniaks and Serbs. Although Covic has traditionally been close to Party of Democratic Action (SDA) President Sulejman Tihic, the political animosity between them, due largely to SDA's endorsement of Stipe Prlic as director of HT Eronet over Covic's objections (ref C), has all but eliminated communication between the two erstwhile allies. Covic seems to be looking elsewhere for Bosniak partners, as he confirmed to his party Presidency that he met with Party for BiH (SBiH) President Haris Silajdzic on January 20. Meanwhile, SDA has initiated ties with HDZ-1990, which has generated optimism in our HDZ-1990 contacts on the prospects of a coalition. Covic also is finding partners in the Republika Srpska. He told his party Presidency he planned to meet soon with Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) President Mladen Ivanic, although Covic appears to be drifting more toward Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) President -- and Republika Srpska (RS) Prime Minister -- Milorad Dodik (septel).

Mostar Remains Sensitive

¶9. (C) One element of the spar between HDZ-BiH and SDA was the mayoralty battle in Mostar, which ended in December 2009 with the election of HDZ-BiH's Ljubo Beslic but has not alleviated enough tension for the city to function properly. The Bosniaks are angry because the Croat candidate was selected despite HDZ-BiH's pledge to support the SDA

candidate, and the Croats are angry because it took a HighRep imposition to put the mayor in place. Both sides are angry that the international community did not intervene sooner. Meanwhile, the City Council is considering the possibility of adopting the long-disputed Mostar City Statute, which OHR imposed in 2004 and whose implementation the Croats have blocked, as it does not include the direct election of the mayor (ref D). HDZ-BiH has declared that it would accept the Statute if it were amended to provide for the direct election of the mayor, a proposition SDA has refused.

Concerns about Changes in Zagreb

¶10. (C) BiH Croat parties also have traditionally sought closer ties to Zagreb during campaigns, as a perceived endorsement from the Croatian HDZ for one of the BiH HDZs would provide it a significant electoral boost. Our BiH Croat contacts tell us that they are unsure how their relationship with Zagreb will change with President-elect Josipovic. They are definitely concerned, however, about a proposal that the Croatian government approved to eliminate dual residency for Croatian citizens outside Croatia (ref E).

Some BiH Croats have speculated that Croatia -- or HDZ-Croatia -- is punishing the BiH Croats for supporting the second-place, independent presidential candidate, rather than the HDZ-Croatia or SDP-Croatia candidate. (Comment: We believe this speculation is misguided, as HDZ-Croatia is unlikely to punish one of its most loyal voting blocs over the presidential elections, as many HDZ-Croatia members voted for non-HDZ candidates. Moreover, according to the Croatian Foreign Ministry, this legal change has been planned for a long time as part of Croatia's EU accession process and could not be delayed much longer. End comment.) Cardinal Puljic has expressed disappointment that the Catholic Church was not consulted, and representatives of both BiH HDZs have also conveyed their chagrin that they were not part of the discussion. Covic met on January 23 with Kosor in Zagreb to discuss this issue, as well as general cooperation. Shortly after their meeting, the Croatian parliament withdrew the motion from urgent procedure, and it now awaits consideration in regular procedure. Covic told his party Presidency that he and Kosor plan to meet again on February 5.

Comment

¶11. (C) Worrisome rhetoric and divisions are already characterizing the pre-election atmosphere among Croats.

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Amid growing concerns of international abandonment and estrangement from erstwhile Bosniak allies, BiH Croat parties are competing to "protect" the BiH Croats' position from enemies foreign and domestic. Such ideas as the Inter-Cantonal Council and Croat Forum, which hearken back to the Croat Self-Rule movement, are dangerous, even if inter-party personality disputes prevent their taking shape. Moreover, talk of a third entity is proving an appealing tool for both HDZs, as well as the highly influential Cardinal Puljic, and will only increase as the campaign unfolds. Given escalating separatist rhetoric among the Serbs and the estrangement between SDA and HDZ-BiH, third entity rhetoric is likely only to alarm the Bosniaks and contribute to a contentious, nationalist election campaign.

¶12. (U) Embassy Zagreb has cleared this cable.
ENGLISH